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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/16/2026

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: AOUN CONFIRMS BELGIUM TRIP LINKED TO PRISONER
EXCHANGE

REF: BEIRUT 3006

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) At the conclusion of a 9/16 meeting with Michel Aoun and his advisor/son-in-law Gebran Bassil (septel), the Ambassador asked to see the General one-on-one to ask about Aoun's mysterious 48-hour trip to Belgium, concluded the previous day. Aoun confided that, besides meeting with some Belgium and EU officials (including Javier Solana), he had hoped to negotiate an exchange of the Israeli soldiers kidnapped by Hizballah for Samir Kantar and other Lebanese imprisoned in Israel. The details of his travel correspond with what we reported in reftel, in information passed to us by Saad Hariri.

¶2. (S) Aoun said that, because of the "trust" he enjoys with Hizballah, many people have approached him for help in releasing the Israeli captives in return for the Lebanese in Israel. Jesse Jackson pushed him hard, he said, as did some German MPs in town. Lebanese-Americans with close ties to Israel have begged him to use his influence with Hizballah. So when Monsignor Jean Ibrahim Abboud, the Lebanese origin priest now living in Belgium, told Aoun that the Belgians, too, wanted Aoun's assistance, Aoun took the matter seriously when Abboud was able to produce Belgian military transport between Brussels and Beirut.

¶3. (S) Aoun said that he quickly discovered in Brussels that Belgium had no authorization from Israel to discuss any kind of deal. Israel, Aoun said, is clearly not using Belgium as its channel, despite the assurances Abboud alleges to have received from Israeli officials. Aoun said that he therefore concentrated on other issues in his Brussels meetings, since the Belgians had nothing to offer on prisoners. The Ambassador asked Aoun if had been giving authority by Hizballah to negotiate on Hizballah's behalf. No, Aoun replied, but he expressed confidence that had Belgium through Abboud or others been more forthcoming about Israeli offers, he could have won the release of the two IDF soldiers. Queried by the Ambassador, Aoun emphasized the humanitarian (vice political) nature of his hoped-for mediation. He added that, with the Belgium trip behind him, he is not part of any current channel on prisoner exchanges.

¶4. (C) Soon after the conclusion of the Ambassador's meeting with Aoun, Hariri-owned Future TV, in a breaking news story, spilled some of the details of Aoun's trip. Gebran Bassil, noting he had been briefed by Aoun on the one-on-one meeting described above, called the Ambassador to complain. In Bassil's analysis, the news story is clear evidence of collusion between the instruments of the state and Hariri's political interests. Future TV must have had information on the Belgian military flights, the passenger manifest, and Abboud's Lebanon visits through the Ministry of Interior, headed by Hariri loyalist Ahmad Fatfat. The Ambassador noted that the plane manifests available to the Ministry of Interior would not have led one necessarily to conclude that the

General was on a prisoner exchange mission.

15. (S) Comment: One has to give Aoun and Hizballah credit for diabolically brilliant political strategies that could badly hurt the March 14 alliance. For example, signing a MOU on February 6, the day after Sunnis rioted in Beirut's leading Christian neighborhood, was a stroke of political genius: Sunnis trashing Christian-owned property contrasted with Shia (as represented by Hizballah) signing an agreement with a Christian leader. Had this prisoner exchange idea worked, Aoun would have been a hero and PM Siniora's power greatly diminished. Now that the story of this failed prisoner deal is out in public, we will use it to press Siniora to exercise more leadership on trying to get information about, and the release of, the two soldiers. We also will talk with UN envoy Geir Pedersen about having the UN state clearly that the mediation must go through official government channels. There may be an opportunity in the near-miss of Aoun's prisoner exchange deal -- which surely has shaken all March 14 politicians -- to get some movement from the GOL on this issue. End comment.
FELTMAN